

Book Review: In Defense Of Natural Theology: A
Post Humean Assessment

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BOOK REVIEWS

In Defense of Natural Theology: a Post-Humean Assessment, edited by James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis. InterVarsity Press, 2005. Pp. 333. \$26.00 (Paper).

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After a brief introduction, the book is divided into two parts. Part one is devoted to explicating Hume's, and the Humean legacy's, objections to natural theology. Part two, the much larger part, is devoted to defenses of the, thematically if not historically, traditional arguments of natural theology. In these chapters are discussed versions of cosmological arguments and teleological arguments, the moral argument, arguments from religious experience, reason, and consciousness, and a cumulative case argument.

Part one offers useful clarification and raises important questions. Terrence Penelhum's "Hume's Criticism of Natural Theology" is an excellent one-chapter introduction to Hume's writings on religion.

In "Hume's Stopper and the Natural Theology Project" James F. Sennett discusses the oft-cited objection that the existence claims that are supported by natural theology arguments (if they are supported) do not even approach the claim of traditional theism, and so, cannot be good arguments for theism. This objection includes, as Sennett calls it, the offering of candidate gods any of which could fill the role of creator/designer. Sennett identifies a "principle of ignorance" at the heart of Hume's stopper. This principle dictates that an argument be assessed based only on the information contained in the premises. As Sennett puts it, "no substantive 'hidden premises' are allowed" (p. 87). Sennett distinguishes between the logical and the 'alethic' evaluation of an argument. As I understand the distinction, while the need for a significant amount of background knowledge would suggest a negative logical evaluation, this should not necessarily lead to a negative alethic evaluation of an argument. In short, the principle of ignorance militates against the principle of total evidence.

A concern arises based on Sennett's appeal to the principle of total evidence. Sennett claims the, "history of survival and thriving in the face of intense criticism sets theism apart from all other world religions" (p. 94). But, the philosophical theism we are supposed to be discussing is not a world religion. The survival and thriving of theism in the west may well be due to elements found in Judeo-Christian theism that lie outside the



purview of natural theology. Sennett discusses the possible objection that he has moved beyond natural theology. He claims, "The existence of theism as a religious viewpoint and its dialectical history are empirical facts about the world we live in," and so in arguing, as he does, to the existence of the theistic God, Sennett claims there are, "no nuances that require previous religious commitment to appreciate or accept" (p. 102). But again, the religious viewpoint to which Sennett refers is not theism but Judeo-Christian theism. While his argument may not require religious commitment, his 'empirical facts' are replete with them. This seems problematic given how Sennett uses these 'facts' in his argument.

A general question arises from part one as to just how forceful are Hume's criticisms. There seems to be two lines of argument going through this first part of the book, each echoed in part two. One line argues that Hume is largely correct in his objections to traditional natural theology, however, with a new focus, there is still much for natural theology to accomplish. Another line of argumentation concludes that Hume is largely incorrect in his objections to traditional natural theology and the project of natural theology remains intact and has been consistent into its contemporary employment.

Those who reject outright Hume's criticisms do so based on problems with Hume's overall project. While Todd M. Furman's "In Praise of Hume: What's Right About Hume's Attack on Natural Theology" cogently demonstrates the problems of natural theology given Hume's general philosophical approach, Keith Yandell's "David Hume on Meaning, Verification, and Natural Theology" makes clear that Hume's general approach cannot possibly be correct. Among other infelicities, Hume's epistemology, and the epistemologies following in Hume's legacy, are fundamentally inconsistent. In "Hume and the Moral Argument" Paul Copan shows how Hume's approach to ethics is equally problematic. R. Douglas Geivett, in "David Hume and a Cumulative Case Argument," rejects Hume's criticisms as failing to address the true issue even in the natural theology of Hume's day.

Those who seem to agree with Humean critiques concerning the traditional natural theology of Hume's contemporaries argue that natural theology is by no means exhausted by traditional approaches. In the introduction, the editors see contemporary natural theology as a modest project. Its arguments are not meant to prove God exists. Instead, they are to, "supply a significant level of epistemic pedigree to the theistic or Christian beliefs of many people" (p. 16). In "Hume, Fine-Tuning and the 'Who Designed God?' Objection," Robin Collins readily admits that traditional versions of teleological arguments fail. He argues the fine-tuning argument succeeds because its proponents incorporate a better understanding of the universe and the methods of non-deductive reasoning.

While the book contains strong arguments for the propriety and cogency of natural theology, there are some reasons for hesitation. For example, in the seventh chapter, "Hume and the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument," Garrett DeWeese and Joshua Rasmussen seek to defend a *kalam* type cosmological argument from Humean attacks—objections based on Hume's views on causation and Hume's stopper. While the essay is a helpful guide through the vast literature, it seems neither goal has been met. The authors argue that a particular principle of causality,

PC3—Whatever *begins to exist* has a cause of its existence, can be supported by a particular principle of sufficient reason, PSR3'—Possibly there is a sufficient reason why some contingent concrete objects exist rather than none at all. Considering the proposition *p*, *some contingent concrete objects exist rather than none at all*, the authors argue from PSR3' to their conclusion. I reproduce the argument in its entirety:

- (1) There is a possible world *W* in which *q* is true and *q* explains *p*. [from PSR3']
- (2) *p* is contingently true and there is no explanation of *p*. [assumption for indirect proof]
- (3) There is a possible world *W* in which (*p* and “there is no explanation of *p*”) is true, and in which *q* is true and *q* explains (*p* and “there is no explanation of *p*”). [from (1) and (2)]
- (4) In *W*, *q* explains *p*. [from (3) and the distribution of explanation over conjunction]
- (5) Therefore, in *W*, *p* both has and does not have an explanation.
- (6) It is not the case that *p* is contingently true and there is no explanation of *p*. [from (12–19) by indirect proof]
- (7) Therefore, it is not the case that, for any proposition *p*, *p* is contingently true and there is no explanation of *p*. (p. 143, footnote 74)

Aside from the typographical error in the cited support for line 6, and that line (4) follows directly from line (1), there is a significant problem. This argument employs a clear equivocation. As stated, (2) is most reasonably understood to be about the actual world. It does follow from (2) that there is a possible world in which the conjunction, “*p* and ‘there is no explanation of *p*,’” is true. However, nothing in premises (1) and (2) entails the truth of the second conjunct of (3). If (5) is indeed to follow from the preceding premises, *W* must refer to the same world in both (1) and (3). Of course, this would follow if the actual world in (2) refers to the same possible world *W* in (1). If we understand (2) as being about the actual world, it does not follow from the argument that *p* has an explanation in the actual world unless *W* in (1) refers to the actual world. However, that claim does not follow from PSR3'. So, for (1) to be true, as entailed by PSR3', *W* cannot be given any further determination; however, for the argument to succeed, *W* in (1) must be equated with the actual world. Without this equivocation, the argument does not bar the possibility that *p* has an explanation in a possible world *W* not identical to the actual world, and that *p* does not have an explanation in the actual world. Of course, this problem does not show (7) false; however, this argument does not show it to be true.

Other possible problems may lurk in the shadows of two concepts that recur throughout the book: simplicity, and ad hocness. Interestingly, these concepts do not get entries in the book's index, yet they are important considerations for almost every author in the book. In “Hume and the Argument from Consciousness,” J. P. Moreland discusses these considerations as two of three issues in scientific theory acceptance. Discussing

simplicity as a type of epistemic virtue, he points out that, “given rival [theories] A and B, if A is simpler than B but B is more descriptively accurate than A, then it may be inappropriate—indeed, question begging—for advocates of A to cite A’s simplicity as grounds for judging it superior to B” (p. 275). Concerning ad hocness, Moreland explains, “given rival theories R and S, the postulation of *e* in R is ad hoc and question begging against advocates of S if *e* bears a relevant similarity to the appropriate entities in S, and in this sense is at home in S, but fails to bear this relevant similarity to the appropriate entities in R” (p. 274).

Moreland’s point regarding epistemic virtues seems to undermine the authors’ basic responses to Hume’s stopper. The often-repeated response to Hume’s candidate gods claim is to appeal to the simplicity of monotheism over those rivals. However, it seems Hume is asking for descriptive accuracy above simplicity. If this is the case, which seems a straightforward reading, and if Moreland is correct, then many of the authors in this book are making an inappropriate response to Hume that may indeed be question begging.

Furthermore, many of the authors in part two claim their argument gains importance when placed within a cumulative case argument for God’s existence, the type of argument discussed by Geivett in the last chapter. Geivett rejects Humean criticisms based on a distinction between “generic theism”, an abstracted theism that can admit of particular versions, and “nonspecific theism,” which is mutually exclusive of any particular version of theism. Geivett argues that if a particular version of theism is true, or rational, then generic theism is true, or rational. On the other hand, if a particular, specified theism is true, or rational, then nonspecific theism is false, or irrational. Hume, according to Geivett, confuses general theism with nonspecific theism. While Hume shows nonspecific theism to be false, or irrational, this does not show general theism to be so as well because Hume’s criticisms do not show that no specified theism can be true, or rational. In fact, Geivett goes on to argue, Christian theism can be shown to be rational.

However, the move to a cumulative case argument that incorporates Christian distinctives may generate some Humean doubts about the natural theology project. One reason for skepticism may arise based on the claim made by a number of authors in this volume that positing certain features of God is not ad hoc because those features are held to apply to God for reasons outside the particular focus of their immediate discussion. However, if a cumulative case must be made for God’s existence, then the problem of possible ad hocness ramifies. As the relations between the arguments of natural theology become more complex, what can be incorporated in making each argument requires more circumspection. What makes applying certain features to God non-ad hoc when the arguments of natural theology are taken together as a unified set of interrelated arguments? If such features of God are found outside natural theology, it is hard to see where these features find their support if not from revealed theology. But if this is the case, it is not at all clear that these features are ‘at home’ in natural theology as required by Moreland’s explanation stated above. Indeed, one step of Geivett’s cumulative case brings the claims of revealed religion to bear on the question of God’s existence. But this appeal

to revealed knowledge undermines the entire natural theology project as historically understood.

How should one characterize this post-Humean natural theology project? The distinction between natural theology and revealed religion has been significantly blurred. One can understand this as an argument against Hume, as a capitulation to Hume, or as the grateful refinement of the natural theology project in light of Hume's forceful and telling criticisms of earlier, inadequate employments of natural theology. While this volume does not give a clear answer to this question, the work done within its pages aids greatly one's attempts to grasp the place of natural theology in the broader religious context. In that regard, this volume is a valuable addition to contemporary Christian scholarship.

Faith, Reason and the Existence of God, by Denys Turner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xix + 271. \$70.00 (cloth), \$29.99 (paper).

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Denys Turner is a theologian and the author of *The Darkness of God* (1995), a well-received study of mystical theology. In the Preface to the present volume he remarks that his earlier book led some to object that he had taken apophaticism "to the point of apparently denying that we can say anything true of God," as was not his intent (p. xiii). His goal in *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* is to redress that imbalance through a careful exploration of what reason can and cannot accomplish in relation to God. Specifically, Turner (a Roman Catholic) defends the position of the First Vatican Council that it is an article of *faith* that the existence of God can be known by natural reason. This might seem to place him at odds with the apophatic approach that he earlier defended. Turner, however, believes that natural theology and apophaticism are natural allies, for natural theology properly pursued places reason "at the end of its tether," asking "the sorts of questions the answers to which . . . are beyond the power of reason to comprehend" (p. xv). If there are rationally compelling proofs of the existence of God, as he believes there must be, "what the 'proofs' prove is at one and the same time the existence of God and that, as said of God, we have finally lost our hold on the meaning of 'exists'" (p. 87).

It will be noticed that I say *if* there are such proofs. Although Turner is confident that such proofs must be available, he does not himself offer one, nor does he say where in the tradition they are to be found. He holds up Aquinas's Five Ways as a model of *how* such proofs ought to be done, but he makes no attempt to rebut the standard objections to the Five Ways or to update Aquinas in contemporary terms. Surprisingly, near the end of the book it emerges that Turner's preferred argument strategy would begin with the question, "why is there something rather than nothing?" This is of course the question famously posed by Leibniz. Turner seems to think that it would be preferable to develop the argument in a Thomistic rather than Leibnizian fashion, but he does not elaborate in any detail. His